

STALKER

THE BOARD GAME

PERSONAL STORIES

RULES & MEMORIES



OVERVIEW

Personal Stories is an optional expansion for S.T.A.L.K.E.R. The Board Game. It is playable with any Campaign, as well as with the Zone Survival game mode.

It introduces personal achievements that Stalkers can earn throughout the game, gaining a little insight into their past. Once unlocked, those memories give access to special gameplay bonuses dedicated to a particular Stalker: Turn tokens, Items, Attachments, or Environment cards.

Keep in mind that using this expansion may slightly lower the difficulty level.

COMPONENTS

The Personal Stories expansion contains the following components:



13x Double sided Achievement sheets



13x Personal Turn tokens



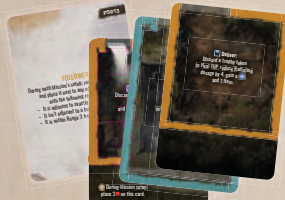
3x Barricade tokens



13x Personal Attachment cards



13x Personal Item cards



13x Environment cards



1x Personal Stories Rules & Memories

SETUP

After you finish setting up your campaign, but before you begin the game, give every player an Achievement sheet for their Stalker.

You can add this expansion after you have already started the campaign, or when playing the Zone Survival game mode (or even when playing a series of the Zone Survival game with the same Stalker). To do so, give every player an Achievement sheet for their Stalker after Mission Setup. Note that it will be a tougher task to accomplish all Achievements during shorter runs.

EARNING ACHIEVEMENTS



BORSUK

- ☐ **Artifact Hoarder**
Equip an Artifact that you've just gained from an Anomaly, while having two other Artifacts already equipped.
Read Borsuk's Memory 01 on page 10.
- ☐ **Irradiated Path**
Lose no HP from an Enemy Attack while being on a space with ☢️.
Read Borsuk's Memory 02 on page 10.
- ☐ **Anomaly Adept**
Enter an Anomaly space with an uncovered ☢️ symbol without Activating the Anomaly.
Read Borsuk's Memory 03 on page 10.
- ☐ **Using Your Surroundings**
Use the "Decoy" Basic Action to Move an Enemy into an Anomaly space and Activate it.
Read Borsuk's Memory 04 on page 11.

After completing all Achievements, read Borsuk's Memory 05 on page 11.

You earn an Achievement as soon as you meet the requirements listed on its sheet.

When you earn an Achievement, mark it on your sheet and read the corresponding Memory (which can be found in the following pages of this book). Then, gain the listed rewards (each card has its special code which allows you to easily find it). Afterwards, continue the game.

You may decide to postpone reading the Memory until any moment you see fit (for example, if you want to finish the current Action or Turn first), to avoid interrupting regular gameplay. You may also return to your unlocked Memories and reread them at any time (but you don't receive the corresponding reward an additional time).

Note that order of Achievements on the Achievement sheet are not related to the rewards you get (i.e. the first Memory will sometimes give you a Personal Item card, and sometimes a Personal Attachment card).

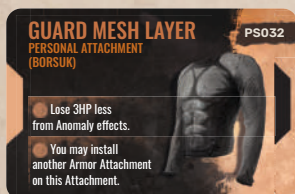
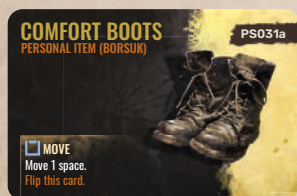
PERSONAL TURN TOKENS



These tokens represent the unique feats of your Stalkers, and work like their counterparts from the core game. They grant an additional once per Mission effect.

When unlocked, return one of the core game Turn tokens to the box, and place the newly acquired token in its place. From now on, when its conditions are met, you may flip your Personal Turn token to apply an additional effect.

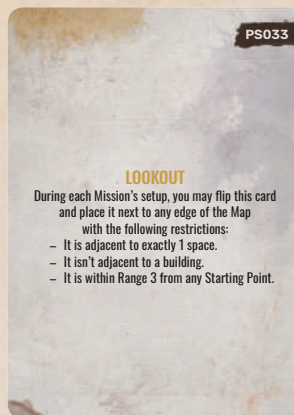
PERSONAL ITEMS AND ATTACHMENTS



These special things remind your Stalkers of meaningful moments in their lives. Personal Items and Attachments work like their counterparts from the core game, but with a few exceptions:

- Only the Stalker with its name printed on the card can use it.
- They cannot be sold or bought, but you can keep them in your Stash between Missions.
- Personal Items and Attachments discarded during Campaign Missions return immediately to your Stash.
- All Personal Items are flipped after use, and can be flipped back after fulfilling certain conditions printed on the card.

ENVIRONMENT CARDS



These cards represent places that resemble the locations previously visited by your Stalker. One side of the card contains a Note that reminds you how to place the Environment card during setup. The other side of the Environment card is part of the Map you can enter during the Mission. They may provide new Actions or change some game rules.

You will be instructed to place these cards on the edge of the Map within Range 1-3 from the starting point. These cards are not overlays as they are placed fully outside the Map, making it bigger. Each Environment card needs to be placed in such a way that it connects to the Map by its shorter edge, and entry onto it is fully connected with an empty space on the regular Map.

Remember, only Environment cards that were unlocked by the Stalkers who take part in the current Mission may be used in that Mission. Once an Environment card is placed on the Map, all Stalkers may enter that card and use any of the actions printed on it.

Here's an example of correct PS Environment card placement:



Here are examples of incorrect PS Environment card placement:



Environment card is not within Range 3 of the Starting Point.



Entry onto the Environmental card is not clearly connected with an empty space on the Mission Map.



Environment card connected by its longer edge.



Environmental card is placed partially on the Map



Environmental card is placed diagonally.

UNLOCKED ELEMENTS DURING CAMPAIGN

Before you depart on a Mission you may equip your Stalker with any of the previously unlocked Items and Attachments belonging to your Stalker. If you do, place them face up (Items are placed on their "a" side face-up) in their respective slots on your PDA. Leave all remaining unlocked Personal Items and Personal Attachments in the Stash.

Before you depart on a Mission you may place all unlocked Personal Turn tokens belonging to the Stalkers who take part in the current Mission on their active side (the one with the effect).

After Mission Setup you may place all Environment cards unlocked by the Stalkers who take part in the current Mission, on the Map following the placement rules outlined above.

MEMORIES

Palkan's Memories

PALKAN'S MEMORY 01

Palkan felt the man rather than heard him. Truth be told, he was sneaking up almost soundlessly, but in the Zone no one does that unless they have bad intentions.

Palkan sprang up, dashed left, and rolled on the ground. The attacker's knife missed by mere centimeters.

Palkan's bayonet did not. Fifteen centimeters of fine steel plunged right into the assailant's belly.

"Next time shoot me," he snarled into the dying man's face. "Perhaps you will live."

The man was in agony, but there was something in his eyes that told Palkan to drop down immediately. A heartbeat later, a gunshot smashed the silence of the night. Then another one, both of which disturbingly close.

But Palkan did not stop to admire the marksmanship. A second was enough for him to blend with the dark, and then he needed some more to locate the shooter and get him.

"It's funny that after all those years they still want me dead," he said sarcastically as he sat on the dead body of the sniper. "Like I was able to get out of here and tell anyone. Someone must be freaking out out there."

He spat on the ground and laughed bitterly.

Gain Personal Item card **PS011 (Bayonet)**.

PALKAN'S MEMORY 02

The soldiers moved quickly onward, Palkan in the front, scanning the area with the barrel of his Viper. It was already dark, but his night vision worked perfectly.

"Lieutenant, that's it," the scout pointed out. "This is the research facility."

Palkan glanced at the half-ruined compound and winced.

"A fancy name for shit-hole," he muttered.

The scout smiled lightly.

"Mutants, four o'clock," one soldier reported. "Three hundred meters away, not moving."

"Any sign of the scientists?" Palkan asked.

"None so far."

"Good. We--"

The silence of the night was suddenly interrupted by shouting.

"Finally! You're here."

A man ran to them, arms flailing, his white overall flapping around.

"I thought you would never come," he cried. "And I have discovered the qualities of the--"

"Mutants on the move," another soldier reported.

Palkan could already see the shapes of approaching mutants himself.

How come men of science are actually such idiots? he thought.

Then he saw another scientist running out of the bunker. A slender woman, her long dark hair loose.

For a split second Palkan thought he was looking at Diana, and he needed two or three heartbeats to understand how impossible that was. The reality check, as always, came with a sharp twinge.

"Lock on target," Palkan sputtered. "Cover me!"

In the dead of the dark Zone night, he sprang up and ran to the shocked scientists. He pushed the man towards his soldiers, and covered the woman with his own body, whirled, and opened fire. His bullets tore the body of the nearest mutant. The brute had frighteningly long nails, and Palkan was relieved to be wearing brand-new, top-quality armor.

"Thank you," the woman mumbled. She looked so different now. How could he even let his imagination fool him?

"I am sorry," she continued. "I should have--"

"Yes, you should," he cut in. "Now focus."

The same goes for me, he thought.

The battle raged on.

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS012 (Modified Armor Plates)**.

PALKAN'S MEMORY 03

The sudden barrage of gunfire forced Palkan and his men to duck.

He swore under his breath. He had not heard this sound for months, and he wished he would never do so again.

"Lieutenant, it is a heavy machine gun!" whispered one of his men.

"Like I didn't know that myself," snarled Palkan.

His mind whirled. He had no idea bandits had access to such powerful weapons, but judging by their screams of mad joy, they didn't have enough self-control to operate them.

They must have looted someone, he thought. Bastards.

"They don't deserve it," he said when the rattle of the gun had died down.

"Sir?" His sergeant looked up, his face muddled. "You mean the gun?"

"That too." Palkan gritted his teeth. "First of all, they don't deserve the chance to kill you. This is how we play it."

His battle plan was short but smart. A part of the unit was ordered to move away and distract the bandits by shouting that they had loot to sell. The other part was

supposed to wait in the shadows and watch the situation develop. At the right time, they were to strike.

His hands sweating, Palkan watched the events unfold.

"We have meds," his men shouted as ordered. "Don't shoot. We have meds to sell! And vodka! Cigarettes! Come out to trade!"

He had expected that the defenders would want the would-be traders to come closer, but no. They were naive enough to leave the bunker and their HMG. And, when they were far enough, they died a quick death. "Great job, sir," the sergeant said when their rifles had cooled down. "You played it like chess."

"It's easy when your opponent is a moron," Palkan replied. "If the opponent seems smarter than you, flee."

If you can, that is, he thought bitterly. In his mind, he went back to the dreadful event that trapped him forever in the Zone. He overcame the wave of dark sadness and turned to his men.

"Take all you deem worthy!" he ordered. "We go back to the camp."

Gain Personal Environment card **PS013 (Regroup Camp)**.

PALKAN'S MEMORY 04

They had been marching for an entire day. The soldiers were dog-tired, but the clouds above them promised heavy rain soon. They needed to find shelter.

"Maya." Palkan looked at the scout. "See that building over there? Sneak up to it and check if it can host a party of eight."

Maya smiled with an effort.

"Sure thing, boss."

Palkan remembered all of a sudden that Maya had been complaining about sore feet, and dismissed her with a wave.

"No, wait. I will do it."

The building was a half-ruined farmhouse with a fallen fence and the rusty body of a tractor. Palkan was approaching it carefully, always on alert. His gut feeling told him that the building could be occupied.

He saw a plastic toy car in the rubble. A red racing car.

"Slavko would like this," he thought with a sad smile and bent to pick it up.

A bullet flew where his head had been a split second before. Palkan fell to the ground, rolled over, and hid behind a crumpled well. He looked out and fired a couple of rounds but also noticed that another shooter had joined the fray.

I'm glad I took Maya's job, he thought. I don't think she has a soft spot for toy cars.

He gritted his teeth and opened fire.

Gain Personal Turn token – Relentless.

PALKAN'S MEMORY 05

The hill was not a particularly tall one, but it was close to the frontier of the Zone, and the day was surprisingly sunny. And Palkan had some amazingly strong binoculars.

He took them out, and for a long time, he watched the horizon.

If someone saw his eyes, they would see longing in them as if he was trying to see something he had been missing for a long time. If someone could read his mind, they would see flashes of his life before the Zone. His promising army career in the special forces. His happy marriage, and their son's innocent, beautiful face. And finally, the fateful assignment.

It was a dirty but also non-negotiable one, organized unofficially, but with thought-provoking precision. He was ordered to go down to the Zone and eliminate a single target. He did what he was supposed to do. He also managed to reach the evacuation point in time, but much to his shock, no one was waiting. He found only a photo of his family and a short note: "Don't come back."

He understood that he had been cut loose. Whatever he did had a significant meaning out there. The assassination could never be revealed.

In that one moment, Slavko's face became a tearful memory.

And the Zone became his new home.

Powerful forces kept him from reaching out to his wife and son, but he never stopped missing them. Not ever for a second.

When Palkan took the binoculars away, there was nothing in his look but barely contained longing and grim determination.

"One day I will see you, Slavko," he promised himself for the hundredth time. "And you too, Diana. One way or another."



Sveta's Memories

SVETA'S MEMORY 01

In a split second, the distant flame turned into a hornet-like, white-hot missile.

The bastards got an RPG, Sveta realized.

"Cover!" she yelled at the top of her lungs and started running. She ducked, rolled, and sprang up some steps away, safely hidden behind a scorched rock. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the rest of their company hide.

Not everyone did, though. The world exploded to her left. Exactly where their commander was.

No one could survive a blast like this, and Sveta suddenly realized that she was the right one to take over.

"Just like in the old days," she thought. "When a manager was on sick leave, quit, or was fired, someone had to do his job. More often than not, it was me."

Sveta jumped out of the roiling smoke and ran forward, hunched, toward the bunker where the fighters celebrated their lucky shot. She landed in a shallow puddle, and mud splashed her face.

"That corpo was a bit less dirty," it crossed her mind. "And less smelly. But more stressful."

She rolled toward the hole where the smoke and the cheers were coming from. Fortunately, two of the fighters looked out at that exact moment. Sveta pulled the trigger.

Neither of them knew what hit them.

"And way less satisfying."

Gain Personal Item card PS021 (Office ID Badge).

SVETA'S MEMORY 02

"Are we close?" the man panted.

Sveta didn't like him. She didn't like the fear in his eyes and the way he twitched any time the bushes rustled in the wind. She was sure that the man was not soldier material. He had the look of a scientist or some other egghead, but for some reason her commanders needed his support. Fine, she thought. Let's get him where he needs to be and forget about him.

The swamp bubbled. A mutant cried in the distance. The man visibly trembled and looked around in panic.

"Are we close?" he repeated.

"Yes." She decided to break the silence. "An hour or so."

"An hour?" The man was outraged and disappointed at the same time. "This is not even close to close."

"Shut up. And stay here."

The egghead started protesting, but Sveta threatened him with the gun, and he stopped. It was

about time because the cry of the mutant never repeated. And she knew that type and remembered that they always scream unless they focus.

In other words, that one could be getting ready to ambush them.

Silent as the night, she sneaked up on the creature. It was dark as hell, but she continued step by step, until she came across an overturned half-burned UAZ. A perfect cover, she thought.

She hid there and waited until the mutant soundlessly emerged from the rushes. Sveta had already attached the sight to her trusted rifle, and she saw the brute right in the crosshairs. A heartbeat later, its head broke like a ripe melon.

"Got you," she murmured and came back to the trembling egghead.

"You shouldn't have left me like this," he protested.

"Do you even know who I am?"

"As bait, you did well. The rest doesn't concern me."

Gain Personal Attachment card PS022 (Adaptive Sight).

SVETA'S MEMORY 03

Dmytro was her sergeant. A tiny, wiry son of a gun who never complained and hated it when others did. That feral evening as Sveta was dragging him away to safety, he still didn't complain, even though there was a gapping bullet wound in his side.

"I'm gonna get you out," Sveta snarled, her teeth clenched.

"No, no. Stop," Dmytro muttered. His face twisted in agony, and his eyes glazed over, he was staring at her pleadingly. "This is too much for you."

"Too much?" Sveta panted. "Nothing is too much for me, you patronizing ape-"

She sensed the move rather than saw it. In the flash of the moment, she pulled her pistol and pulled the trigger. The bullet went right between the eyes of a jumping snork.

The brute fell dead, and Sveta stood there, panting, looking at the corpse.

Then she looked at Dmytro.

"See? You don't mess with me."

"I know." Dmytro tried to smile. "But I am not afraid. I'm about to see death. I fear nothing."

"Death, eh?" Sveta grabbed the man and returned to hauling. "You men. Always looking for easy ways out. I won't let you die, you stubborn bastard."

And she didn't.

Gain Personal Turn token – Determined.

SVETA'S MEMORY 04

It was just a dog.

Not a blind dog or any other mutated killing machine, but a simple dog, bony and scarred, trembling with cold or fear. Or both. A lone stranger to the Zone, just like she was years ago.

Sveta felt something warm in her heart. She came down from the watchtower to kneel and reach out toward the dog.

"Come here, buddy," she whispered mildly. "Come on. I am not gonna hurt you. I had a dog once, you know?"

She had no idea what spooked the dog. It unexpectedly broke into a run and disappeared in the bushes under the tilting tower. Almost immediately, snork cries rang out, and the bushes trembled. The dog yelped.

"No!" she yelled. "Leave the dog alone, you bastards!"

She didn't even think it over. She just jumped through the bushes right into the middle of a snork pack. She hit two of them with a shotgun, and stabbed the third one with a knife, but it was too late for the dog.

"You bastards," she yelled, her eyes blinded with tears. "There is nothing you respect, is there?"

She'd never felt so much rage before. She kicked the dead snorks and cried until her fury died down.

Only then did she bury the dog.

Gain Personal Environment card PS023 (Watchpost).

SVETA'S MEMORY 05

There was a forgotten payphone on the wall of an abandoned country shop.

Sveta shook her head. She had always thought that phones didn't work anymore and it was next to impossible to contact the outside world and practically the only way to do that was to trust a messenger. The locals, however, had assured her that it did work. Sometimes, at least.

Maybe it is true, she thought. We are close to the border, anyway.

In one decisive moment, she grabbed the receiver and put it close to her ear.

Yes, she could hear the signal.

She dialed the number. Someone answered after four tones.

"Yes?"

It was surreal to hear Natasha's voice again. Her best friend sounded like they had last met yesterday.

"Who is it?"

Sveta had so much to say, but suddenly she felt her throat tighten. What could she possibly say to her friend far away in her comfy life? What could they talk about? Did they have any subjects in common anymore?

"Anyone there? Or is it another stupid joke?"

Sveta slowly hung up.

And never came back there again.



Borsuk's Memories

BORSUK'S MEMORY 01

"There," Borsuk said quietly and placed another stone on top of a small mound. "How could they? Can you imagine that someone was trying to get to your body?" He stood up, his old knees protesting, and bent to lift another stone.

"Now you're gonna be safe here," he added when he put it on top of the others and looked around the slopes of the crater. "No monster will get at your body, I promise."

He sat on the grave and wiped his head with a dirty handkerchief.

"The things I do for you," he whispered. "And why? You idiot. How could you have died such a stupid death? How could you have left me here alone, my only friend?"

He looked up at the blood-red evening sky, his eyes wet with tears.

"Funny. I thought I had cried all of them."

He wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"I did what I had promised to you," he resumed in a stronger voice. "I became a guide. And guess what. Since I left you last month, I have already found three artifacts. And earned new shoes. Nice, eh? Would you have thought?"

His smile faded.

"But... But I would give up all my good fortune for a day with you, my friend."

He stood up.

"Yes, I am a guide. I wasn't able to lead you out of trouble, and I will pay for it by leading others. Until my last breath."

He looked at the grave again.

"And you rest in peace. I am gonna bloody miss you, my brother in arms."

Gain Personal Item card **PS031 (Comfort Boots)**.

BORSUK'S MEMORY 02

The man spoke with an accent Borsuk had never heard before but judging by the quality of his clothes and gear and eagerness to throw money around, he was probably a part of the upper class.

"I am a man of dreams," he said and put on his sunglasses, probably worth a small fortune. "And my dream is to add another hunting trophy to my collection. Find me a... How do you call it? A pseudogiant."

"I am not a tracker," Borsuk protested. "I am a guide."

"It is a tiny difference, and my money will make it disappear," the man said with a contemptuous smile. "And you will guide me to a place they frequent."

"They are not elephants! Those creatures..."

"Do as you are paid to!"

Borsuk could have left the stranger, but he saw the money and thought of his leaking shoes and old coat. He shrugged and accepted the money. The next day, he led the stranger to an old train depot where a pseudogiant was reputed to live. Fortunately, it wasn't far because the stranger didn't want to stop bragging about his hunting expeditions.

"One of them lives in that tumbling building," he informed the stranger, cutting his story short.

"There are pockets of radiation all around it so stay on the path."

"Thank you." The stranger was loading his weapon. "You are worth the money."

Borsuk thought that human worth should not be calculated in money, but he only shrugged and said:

"The pseudogiants have thick skulls."

"And I have a quality rifle," the man replied. "And great armor. Don't stray away. You will help me cut its head off."

Borsuk followed the man but stayed back at the edge of one radiation pocket. The geiger counter clicked alarmingly, but Borsuk didn't expect to be there for too long.

Indeed, soon came the pseudogiant's roar, a few shots, and the man's shrill cry of agony. The enraged pseudogiant ran out of the building, blood smeared on its face, close enough for Borsuk to fire his shotgun twice right into his gaping maw. And then two times more.

The pseudogiant roared feebly and fell.

"If a creature has a thick skull, you aim somewhere else," he said to himself and went to collect the hunter's rifle and his armor pieces if any had survived the clash.

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS032 (Guard Mesh Layer)**.

BORSUK'S MEMORY 03

The Monolithians kept pushing forward with inhuman relentlessness. Grenade explosions were deafening, and bullets whizzed in the air like furious, death-dealing hornets.

Borsuk swore. He couldn't believe he'd gotten into such trouble. It was supposed to be a regular assignment – take a group of mercenaries to Limansk – but somehow it turned into a bloodbath when the warriors of the Monolith had cropped up. Two mercenaries had almost bled out, and another was wounded. The shrubs they were hiding behind offered almost no protection.

He reloaded his gun, but he didn't fire. There was another plan in his head.

"I'm running out of ammo," the leader shouted, her face half-covered in blood.

Borsuk didn't listen. He rolled over, and hid behind the only tree in the area, the trunk already bullet-marked. Then he climbed up to scan the area. Yes, there were anomalies, a lot of them, but...

But he had walked this way once. And he thought he remembered it.

"I have only one clip left," another one moaned, wounded as well. "Those bastards are gonna slaughter all of us!"

Borsuk slid down.

"There is a way out," he shouted, aimed his gun, and fired, but missed.

The leader looked at him in disbelief.

"Where? Red Forest stretches all around the city, and it's rife with anomalies! The Monolithians knew pretty good where to pin us down."

"Monolith followers are idiots. And when I say there is a way, it means there is a way. Cover me and follow me closely. If you do, no anomalies will flare up."

They followed, and they survived.

Gain Personal Environment card **PS033 (Lookout)**.

BORSUK'S MEMORY 04

Borsuk yelled, and the bloodsucker immediately looked in his direction.

Then it broke into a run.

The monster was much faster than the veteran stalker, and its terrifying ability to become invisible made it an undefeatable foe. Running, Borsuk was already panting heavily, but he tossed away his useless weapon and managed to speed up a bit.

He had to. Someone had to drag the monster away from the group of people he had been guiding.

But how long? His exhausted brain asked. How long will you run for?

He felt he could already smell the monster's fetid breath. He was inches away from death.

Then an anomaly flickered brightly. The one he had seen many times in his treks, so often that he actually knew its pattern. To a degree.

This was where he ran.

Luck was on his side again. He knew exactly when to shut his eyes, and the bloodsucker didn't. Invisible or not, it got blinded, but the impetus carried it forward. Too close.

Walking away, Borsuk heard the screams of the bloodsucker shredded to pieces. His heart rate

calming down, he already felt the need to reunite with his group.

He was a guide. Nothing else mattered.

Gain Personal Turn token – Explorer.

BORSUK'S MEMORY 05

The border guard lifted his submachine gun and aimed it at Borsuk's face.

"Freeze," he snarled. "One more step and you are dead."

Borsuk laughed out loud.

"Oh, am I?" he asked jovially. "I am a Zone veteran, lad. Are you seriously threatening me with death?"

The barrel of the gun didn't even budge.

"I have clear orders to detain anyone trying to sneak in into the Zone, old man," the border guard stated.

"I am not sneaking in," Borsuk explained. "I am walking in."

"What difference does it make?"

"The most important one, lad. I am returning to where I belong," Borsuk replied and glanced behind his shoulder. "I have spent my entire life among the dangers of the Zone, and there are moments when I am fed up with it. Then I visit the outside world in the hope I will settle down there, but no. I don't belong to this technology-infested maze where people are obsessed with goods and are too busy to talk to each other. I hate all those glossy things. I hate the haste and the noise. I hate the way everyone looks down on me as if I was a mutant myself or at least a leper. I am coming back home, son. Besides, there are people I need to take to their destination."

He looked the soldier in the eye.

"So? What will it be? Will you deny an old man the way back home, lad?"

The barrel of the gun lowered.



Milady's Memories

MILADY'S MEMORY 01

Her group jumped into the ditch, and so did she. Instinctively, she readied her gun and scanned the area. Damned bandits, she thought.

She had never seen those sorry wretches attack so madly. They also seemed more numerous than ever. What was going on out there?

Either way, a muddy ditch was not a place for her. She was a sniper. She needed a secluded spot to surprise the enemy.

Unnoticed, she jumped out of the trench and rolled into the cover of a dwarf tree. Then she moved to another one.

The bandits hadn't reached the ditches yet. A few of them fell, but the others still pressed on, outnumbering her unit and firing ferociously.

"Bastards," she whispered. "I'm not even supposed to be here. I am looking for somebody, and you are in the way."

Milady raised her rifle in one smooth move and started moving it to pick the right target. And, as if on cue, she saw a man with a battered grenade launcher.

Hold it right there, she thought and pulled the trigger.

Her bullet tore off a part of his skull away. The launcher fell to the ground.

"The more of you who die, the sooner I restart the search."

And they started dying.

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS042 (Susat Scope)**.

MILADY'S MEMORY 02

Milady cursed under her breath and pulled at the ropes, but they were strong, and the knots were tight. She looked around the blank walls of the border guard office and cursed again. How could she have let those bastards catch her like this?

The door opened, and an officer came in, carrying two chipped mugs with hot tea. He put them on the desk and shook his head in fake disbelief.

"I told them not to tie you like this," he sighed. "Overzealous idiots."

"Untie me, then," Milady snarled.

"I will." The officer smiled. "But I need your promise first. Listen, the Zone is a dangerous place, and I cannot let you go out there. Well, you have a fancy military coat, I see, and you most likely think of yourself as a stalker, but no. You're not one of them. You will die the second you step outside, and it would be a shame. We don't see such pretty faces around anymore."

He ran his fingers down her cheek. Milady suppressed her sudden reflex to pull back.

"Listen," she said coarsely. "I am looking for my husband. Lieutenant Stepan Andropov. Have you ever seen him?"

The border guard smacked his lips and pretended to ponder.

"No," he said at last. "No, I haven't. I am sorry, but I am bound by my strict orders and I will have to escort you back home."

Milady felt her hope fail.

"Unless." Mirov's smile became sickening. "Unless you agree to stay here and wait. I am a decent man, you know? I will provide for you."

"I would like that," she uttered, and looked away.

Mirov didn't see that, busy untying the knots.

"Tea?" he asked when Milady finally stood up.

"Gladly," she answered, and once she took her mug, she splashed all of it on Mirov's face. The border guard screamed with agony, and tried to snatch her, but she'd already twisted his arm back and pinned him down to the floor to tie him up with the same rope he had used. Then she gagged him, kicked him in the groin for goodbye, and seconds later, she blended with the dark.

Gain Personal Item card **PS041 (Viper Hood)**.

MILADY'S MEMORY 03

The bandit was faster than Milady had thought.

She watched him grab Tanya's hood in one smooth move, and yank it back. She flailed her arms and almost fell backward, but the man wasted no time and grabbed her by the ponytail.

She should have cut it off years ago, Milady thought. Hidden in the bushes, she raised her gun and aimed.

Tanya was a dear friend and an excellent soldier. She fought the bandit with grim determination, but his muscles seemed made of iron, and his resolve never faltered.

Stop fighting, Milady thought. I don't want to hit you. Dammit, Tanya! Stop thrashing!

As if Tanya had read her mind, she sagged.

"Nice," the bandit snarled. "You have come to your senses? Good!"

He clamped his fingers around her throat.

"Why did you spy on our camp?" he asked. "Who sent you?"

Iconic last words, Milady thought.

He was more than one thousand steps away, but his head was perfectly visible. She aimed, focused, held her breath and...

Pulled the trigger.

The man fell. Tanya released herself in a second and grabbed his gun, but refrained from shooting, seeing that the bandit was never going to get up again. Instead, she spat and turned toward Milady who had just left her cover.

They met and hugged. Tanya had already suppressed the shock, and Milady saw only undiluted sadness in her eyes.

"I am sorry," she whispered. "I have been watching those bastards for days, and I am sure Stepan is not among them. I haven't found him. Please, take your money back."

Gain Personal Environment card PS043 (Sniper's Nest).

MILADY'S MEMORY 04

The patch of fog was dense and even greenish.

Milady faltered, staring at it.

She didn't feel like leaving the relatively safe path she had been following for the last hour. Thorny bushes all around and ponds of stinky, black water promised a tough, unpleasant ordeal.

But the fog...

Her memories suddenly took her back to another life and another world. She clearly saw another mist-shrouded forest with a flock of majestic deer in it. She was stalking them, but not alone. She was with her husband.

With Stepan.

Irritated, she wiped the tears off with her dirty sleeve and looked forward. Visibility was next to none, the air wet but rather healthy, sounds muffled and distorted. Regular fog. She overcame her doubts and was just about to enter the patch when she heard loud, rhythmic breathing. Soon enough, she saw a shape appear among the billows, then another one. Hunched, their arms long, heads misshapen. Mutants.

She gritted her teeth and raised her gun. The grim silence of the bog was shattered by two shots.

It was only when both of them had fallen did she realize that if it hadn't been for the fond memory of her husband, she would have walked upon the mutants and died. She smiled sadly.

"You are still with me," she whispered. "Thank you. Don't worry, Stepan. I will find you."

Gain Personal Turn token – Eagle-eyed.

MILADY'S MEMORY 05

The battle raged on, but it seemed that the Duty was slowly pushing the Freedom away. Milady picked up her sniper rifle to find a better position when she heard a moan from the bushes.

"Medic! Shit, I need a medic..."

Milady knelt by the wounded soldier. She had seen enough fatalities to realize that the man was beyond saving. His eyes glossy, he kept pushing his abdomen, dark blood flowing freely between his fingers.

"Medic," he whispered, but then his gaze focused on her.

"I know you," he managed. "From the photo. You were Stepan's old lady."

Her heart pounding, she bent over the man.

"You knew him? You knew my husband? Lieutenant Stepan Andrukhov?" she said, her voice trembling.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No. Not seen him in... In weeks. But he had business with... God, you're so pretty."

"Tell me about my husband!" she yelled, blinded by tears, but the man smiled again faintly and died.

"In weeks," she repeated. "So my search was not in vain. He had survived that long. Oh, Stepan. You are somewhere here, I know it, and now I have the proof. I will find you, love."



Viter's Memories

VITER'S MEMORY 01

The wounded soldier was getting visibly better. His eyes were not as feverish, and he even managed to sit up a few times.

"Lie down," Viter told him sharply. "Your injury hasn't healed yet, and besides, there is hardly any room to move around here."

The soldier looked around the tiny medshack and lay down.

"Thank you for treating my wounds," he said in a hoarse voice. "Who are you?"

"My name is Viter, and I'm an anomaly researcher," Viter admitted reluctantly.

"An egghead." The soldier smiled faintly. "I wouldn't have guessed. That shot you fired was awesome. I saw that even though I was being mauled by that snork. You hit it in the head from what? Seven hundred meters?"

It was eight hundred or more, but Viter decided not to boast. In his mind's eye, he saw the basic interior of the university range where he'd spent the last months prior to the expedition into the Zone, freezing cold in the winter and stifling in the summer. He felt the familiar weight of his favorite rifle, he heard the words of his instructor and remembered the satisfaction he always felt while examining the holes in the target.

"Where did you learn to shoot like that?" the soldier asked with admiration.

"At school," Viter murmured. "Lie still. I'm gonna get you the meds."

Gain Personal Environment card **PS053 (Med-Shack)**.

VITER'S MEMORY 02

The detector gave Viter a clear reading, but he could already see the Gas with his own eyes. The anomaly kept hissing and billowing, following endless chemical processes known only to a few, Viter among them.

He threw the bolts to make sure, but he already knew enough of the anomaly to make sure steps.

Gas, he thought, looking at the phenomenon. How could they do that to you? How could they name you so dismissively even though you're such a beauty? I will call you Tanya. Or perhaps you would want a male name?

There was no response. Or was there?

As Viter stood up to continue his trek, the tone of the detector changed slightly, and an object close to the edge of the anomaly caught his attention. He bent and picked it up. With delight on his face, he recognized it to be the Soul, one of the rarest and priciest artifacts ever. He looked at the anomaly and smiled.

As if the Zone wanted to show the appreciation.

"Well, I might indeed be the right man in the right place," said Viter. "You're welcome, Zone."

And he set off.

Soul was a stupid name, too, but he didn't think of giving it another name. He thought of giving it a price.

Of course, after he had noted down all the readings and research results in the Book.

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS052 (UDA-14a Detector)**.

VITER'S MEMORY 03

Viter felt the ground descend, and he felt his hope rise. Then he heard the echo of someone's quick footsteps, and his heart sank.

So, he eventually found me? he thought. What a determined bastard.

He looked at the crater he was aiming to reach. It was still shrouded in haze, but Viter was already noticing the characteristic elements of the scenery like circular cracks burning with fire-based anomalies. He could also spot at least one gravity-based anomaly too.

There are only three known Symbionts in the Zone, he thought, his heart beating fast. And I seem to have discovered the fourth.

The follower was close. Viter quickly inspected his gun and set his teeth in grim determination. He had only one bullet left.

No, he thought. The research I was planning to do. The artifacts I could gather. No, no one will take it from me.

He raised his gun and waited for the follower to appear. A mercenary sent by another science team, it seemed. More a scout than a mercenary, but a dangerous one, for sure. His sensor beeped, and Viter nodded. He was ready.

It is sad that science has become a battlefield, he thought bitterly, aimed once again and pulled the trigger.

The scout doubled over and collapsed.

Viter waited and waited, his heart raging, but the follower never got up. The longer he waited, the surer he became.

The discovery was his and his alone. The Book was soon to be complete.

Gain Personal Item card **PS051 (PP-4a Sensor)**.

VITER'S MEMORY 04

Viter halted when he realized the leader of the group had stopped to consult his soldiers. He cursed internally. He had known that the idea of joining

a half-military group was not the smartest one, but he enjoyed the safety of four guns.

But what stopped them again?

"What is it?" he asked sharply, coming up to the soldiers.

"The Fault," said one of them reluctantly, looking at the researcher with poorly concealed contempt. "It is larger than the last one. That volcanic activity—"

"It is not volcanic," Viter interrupted with no respect for any military ranks. "There is no seismic nor tectonic activity in the area of the Zone. It is one huge anomaly."

"Call it what you want," the man barked. "It's impassable."

"No. It is passable. On one condition, though."

"And what is that?" said the soldier, and the others came closer to hear every bit of the conversation.

"That you will be smart enough to follow me," Viter explained. "I have crossed the Fault a number of times before."

And still not enough, he thought. I need a few more readings before the Book is finished.

The leader's sharp words snapped him out of his thoughts.

"And you want us to trust you?" The leader grimaced.

Viter shrugged. He never considered himself a real tough person, but years of experience gave him great resilience. He looked at the soldiers with contempt and said:

"I am going. Stay here if you want."

No one did.

Gain Personal Turn token – Resilient.

VITER'S MEMORY 05

The fire was burning bright and shooting sparks toward the unusually starry sky. Viter looked around the faces of his companions and made up his mind.

They are nice folks, he thought. I mean, nice by the Zone standards. They could be the first.

"I need to tell you a story," he uttered reluctantly, but his words were loud enough to draw all their looks.

"It isn't actually a story," he corrected himself. "More like a confession."

There was a dirty, crumpled notebook in his hands.

"This is the Book. Or a copy of it." He talked with increasing confidence. "Here I have collected all I know about anomalies, and I have been researching them for years. I have a feeling—"

He coughed a few times.

"I have a feeling that my findings may help fight some diseases. In the outside world, I mean," he added.

"And I am looking for a brave, noble person who will take the Book out of the Zone and hand it to a researcher. To a real scientist. Is anyone willing to help?"

There was a long moment of silence. Viter stared at the empty faces and felt his heart sink, but when he was about to give up hope, one of the stalkers raised his hand.

"I will do it," he promised.

Viter handed him the copy of the Book and thanked him warmly, relief making his head swim.

One step toward a better world is taken, he thought. And in the meantime, I will continue the research.



Matis's Memories

MATIS'S MEMORY 01

Their silhouettes were dark against the fire, but the barrels glinted, aiming at him. Matis had no doubt they could kill him in a second.

"Who's there?" a man snarled.

Matis's heart never missed a beat when he came closer to the fire and raised his arms.

"My name is Matis," he said loudly. "I came to trade."

The bandit laughed out scornfully.

"The only reason we didn't kill you was my curiosity," he said. "I wanted to know what kind of idiot exposes himself like this."

Matis raised his eyebrow, and took another step forward.

"Idiot? Or perhaps a person who has nothing to hide and wants to do business?"

"Why would we want to do that?"

"I have seen your camp." Matis's smile broadened.

"Been watching it for a few hours. You have two wounded companions and almost no meds. And my healer's stash is not far from here."

The bandit eyed him uneasily.

"And what would you want in return?"

"Information." Matis came even closer. "Have you heard of any scientific facilities in the area? Especially those that deal with new treatments or medicines?"

Gain Personal Environment card **PS063 (Healer's Stockpile)**.

MATIS'S MEMORY 02

Matis had no idea that mutants were able to exhibit such aggression. Hidden by the burnt-out truck, he watched in awe both males exchanging powerful blows. Visibly oblivious to pain, the mutants fought vehemently until one of them sent the other one flying toward the side of the truck.

The monster hit the vehicle with tremendous, unexpected force. The wreck groaned and began to tilt, and Matis realized too late that he wouldn't be able to move away.

The car fell onto his right leg, trapping it.

Matis moaned with pain, but both fighting creatures were too adrenaline-mad to notice.

I'm gonna die here, he thought in panic, but then a calmer reflection came. No, I can't die. I'm here for Nadia. She needs me.

The memory of his daughter doubled his strength. The man carefully released his leg and crawled out, but there was no doubt that running was not

an option anymore. However, good fortune winked at him. As the van had fallen sideways, its back door had opened with the screech of the hinges and Matis suddenly saw a variety of abandoned weapon attachments and medkits scattered there. Most looked broken, but the sight near him was seemingly in good condition. His hands trembling, Matis put it on his gun and not a second too late.

The stronger mutant had already finished devouring its opponent's vital organs and looked curiously toward Matis. In the crosshairs, its blood-smeared snout was a horrible sight to watch.

Matis pulled the trigger the second the mutant jumped.

Gain Personal Turn token – Prosperous.

MATIS'S MEMORY 03

Matis walked on and on.

The never-fading autumn of the Zone kept sending more and more gusts of wind. Tree branches shook, tall grasses waved, massive clouds billowed until suddenly Matis realized it was going to rain.

There is nothing worse in the Zone than radioactive rain, and there was no shelter in sight. Matis broke into a run, and he suddenly saw an old, concrete bus stop.

"Freeze," a female voice shouted. "Not even a step more."

The woman was hiding in the dark of the bus stop. The first raindrops fell.

Something moved on the roof of the structure. Matis reached for his gun in a split second.

The woman opened fire at that exact moment. Matis managed to get out of her line of sight, aimed, and fired himself.

A dead snork slid off the roof of the bus stop, but halted on the ledge. The woman stopped firing, and Matis emerged, his arms raised.

"I am sorry!" she yelled. "There was a snork behind you! Are you all right?"

"B... behind me?" he stuttered, and looked back.

Indeed, there was a steaming dead body behind him.

"Funny," he uttered. "Because there was one above you as well."

He pointed upward. The woman saw the dangling paw and gasped.

"Come in!" she shouted.

"About time," said Matis and hurried over. The rain was indeed getting intense. "A rather fortunate way to start an acquaintance."

"Totally." The female stalker appeared in the door.

"Here comes the next step. My name is Nadiya!"

Nadiya, he thought. Just like my daughter. Maybe she will know a thing or two about local research centers? "And I'm Matis," panted the man, getting in. He smiled. "Got some tea?"

Gain Personal Item card **PS061 (Quickdraw Kit)**.

MATIS'S MEMORY 04

The Monolithians stood there like two lifeless statues. Matis, hidden behind a pile of debris, stared at them for a while. He was almost certain both could see him, but neither reacted.

Perhaps their brains are entirely washed, he thought. Or is it my camouflage painting? Anyway, let's hope they don't move.

He moved back as silently as he could and hid behind a charred small family car, probably older than the Zone itself. He bent down and found tiny shards of glass among grass blades. Despite the anxiety, a smile appeared on his weary face.

Those were the remains of his camera, which had been smashed by an angry Duty soldier. The man didn't see the point of taking photos, and got irritated by Matis' vain attempts to placate him.

When was it? Matis thought. Months ago, eh? A year, maybe?

It turned out that the event was fairly symbolic, as it marked both the beginning and the end.

Matis, who had arrived in the Zone as a reporter, could not do his job anymore without the camera. Good enough. After all, it wasn't the job that had brought him to the Zone. His ultimate goal was finding the cure.

He didn't like his editor anyway.

Matis looked from behind the car. The Monolithians were gone. He sighed and went back to searching.

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS062 (Camouflage Painting)**.

MATIS'S MEMORY 05

Matis closed his eyes, leaned his head against the wall, and moaned.

"How long has it been?" he asked the silence in the abandoned hospital ward. "How long? Two hundred and fifty days or more, and I still haven't found what I came here for."

He straightened up and looked at the doctor, who was still eyeing him indifferently. He patted his pocket until he found Nadia's photo. He took it out to show the doctor.

"This is Nadia. My daughter. She is fourteen... No, actually, fifteen now, but there is no chance she will make it to sixteen if I don't help her. She has this weird type of cancer, and all those medics are hopeless. They have no clue!"

He didn't realize he was speaking faster and faster.

"They cannot treat her! They don't know how. There is no therapy except some experimental mumbo-jumbo which will never help! The Zone and those artifacts are my only hope! Please!"

He sank to his knees.

"Listen, I have given you all I have, and I am ready to give you more, but please, help me," he begged.

"Please tell me you have found an artifact that may help. You have been researching cancer-treating anomalies, haven't you?"

"No," the doctor answered. "No, I haven't. Leave."

"But you told me you did!" Matis yelled.

"No. You got it all wrong. Go."

The eyes of the doctor were as black as the barrel of his gun. Matis slowly turned and shuffled out.

"Bastard," he thought vehemently, and then looked at the sky, weirdly blue and innocent. Just like Nadia's eyes.

"A bastard like many. But nothing will stop me. I will keep looking, and I will bring you the medicine you need, darling, whatever it takes. I promise."



Mamon's Memories

MAMON'S MEMORY 01

The stalker screamed his lungs out, but his words were drowned by the pounding of Mamon's blood. Each step caused the pain of his wounds to flood his consciousness, but still he pressed on.

"The emission!" he yelled, pointing at the reddening sky. "Take cover, you idiot."

Mamon knew that it was indeed one of the worst things that could happen to anybody in the open. He also knew that the rest of the group had already taken cover. But then he saw Anna whose leg would not heal and who had fallen into the mud some four hundred steps away.

"Come back! She's gone!" the stalker kept yelling.

All Mamon saw were Anna's eyes, wide open and shining with terror. She crawled in the mud, but she already knew she would not make it.

A growl resounded somewhere to the left. Despite a staggering wave of pain, Mamon made himself grab his gun, kneel and fire a few rounds. The mutant, who had smelled two injured men and was sure of an easy meal, rolled in the mud, blood oozing from its fatal wounds.

Mamon threw his gun away and got ready for the last push. He gave himself an adrenaline shot and he sped up, his body screaming. He skidded to a halt where Anna was crawling, threw her over his shoulder, and ran for the shelter.

He got there before the first major discharge in the sky. He delicately put half-conscious Anna onto the ground and looked at the stalker with disdain in his bloodshot eyes. He felt his hatred for men come back and grow almost as strong as it was during his Monolith days.

"You are supposed to take care of us all," he said coldly.

They didn't hear another word from him. Their leader tried to yell the others into submission, and they protested and cursed him to hell, but Mamon was no part of it. In a few deft moves, he dressed Anna's wounds and covered her with a blanket. Then he just sat, oblivious to the raging argument, and waited until the rain abated.

Then he stood up and left.

They never saw him again.

Gain Personal Item card **PS071 (Adrenaline Booster)**.

MAMON'S MEMORY 02

Mamon watched the Monolithians approach with inhumane, mathematical precision. Like pawns on a muddy, bloodstained chessboard, they moved on, their movements precise, their eyes cold. Their

intention was obvious – they wanted to encircle the ruins of the grocery shop where the enemies of the Monolith were hiding.

Or what was left of them.

Mamon knew that the survivors had very little ammo left and almost no hope. His intention was to bring them some of the latter.

Two Monolithians hid behind an overturned Lada. Neither of them even looked at Mamon who joined them silently. Why would they, since he looked and felt like a brother?

Mamon wasn't going to give them a chance to find it out anyway.

He stabbed one in the throat, and then the other one in the heart. Before both bodies fell, he already had a rifle in his hands and some of their ammo, probably even incendiary.

The defenders will need it, he thought.

He took out two more and jumped away, still firing, still sowing confusion.

The grocery shop defenders opened fire with renewed hope. The Monolithians weren't going to win that fight and Mamon knew he should be relieved.

He wasn't, though, and he knew the reasons.

He looked at the dead body and whispered:

"I am no longer one of you, and never will be again, but... Still, I am sorry, brothers."

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS072 (Incendiary Ammo)**.

MAMON'S MEMORY 03

Mamon had always hated fighting underground, and he was right to do so. One minute of blinding and deafening gunfire against the pressure of snorks was enough for the entire unit to disperse. Mamon himself retreated slowly, firing only when he was absolutely sure of the hit. One thing worse than getting lost underground was running out of ammo there.

No, there was something even worse.

Losing the team.

Screams magnified by echoes rang out from all directions, and for the first time since his release from the Monolith, Mamon felt the taste of fear. He had no idea who to fight or where to go. He had done all he could to sever his ties with the Monolith, but he wished it was still with him to guide him.

And then, much to his horror, it spoke.

"Go left, and then up."

A chill went through his body, but deep down in his heart, he felt the warmth of consolation. Until then, he had never realized how strong that severed connection had been.

Mamon pushed all the feelings aside, leaving only certainty. He turned left, shot a snork lurking in the dark of the tunnel, dodged a flickering anomaly, and climbed up a rusty ladder. He emerged from the underground under a sentry tower which he climbed to see what the situation was.

More than anything, though, he wanted to look at the bleak sun. Deep down, he thanked the Monolith for helping him survive, but somehow knew he would never hear it again.

And he felt both relieved and saddened.

Gain Personal Environment card **PS073 (Sentry's Tower)**.

MAMON'S MEMORY 04

"Just to think that we're gonna die in some dump," Nadiya breathed and looked back. She would have fallen if Mamon hadn't caught her arm.

"Die?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

It was the first word he'd said since the ambush that cost them two stalkers. He also got injured, but paid it no heed and carried on, helping the others in need. His stamina seemed endless.

"Any other options in sight?" Nadiya was resigned.

"There are only four of us, and all are wounded. There are twice as many bandits..."

"Save your breath. Lead the rest forward," Mamon cut in.

"And you?"

"I will help them die."

"You mean the bandits?" Nadiya opened her eyes wide.

"Who else?" Mamon asked and left her.

He was not a storyteller, and he never told anyone about the battle that ensued on the dump. He didn't reveal that there were actually not eight, but ten bandits. He never talked about how he shot two of them and wounded their leader, who in turn ordered his men to retreat. Mamon watched them leave with an empty heart. A long-forgotten memory told him that if he were still with his brothers, none of the assailants would have escaped.

He shook it off, though, as he remembered where his new loyalties were.

Sixty minutes later, he was back with the survivors.

"You can take a break now," was all he said.

Gain Personal Turn token – Ferocious.

MAMON'S MEMORY 05

Mamon knelt and closed his eyes. Instinctively, he started swaying and rocking, listening to the pure silence in his mind. It used to be filled with the steady soothing voice of the Monolith, but since his release, there had been only a void there. In the beginning, Mamon still wanted to hear the voice again, but soon got used to the fact that it was not going to happen. The ties were severed for good.

Now he learned to enjoy the silence which appeared to be almost just as soothing.

"Stop doing that," someone growled behind him.

Mamon opened his eyes and looked angrily at Vasyl, pointing his trembling finger at him. His breath stank of vodka.

"Anytime I see it, I want to shoot you right into the middle of your brainwashed head," he yelled, attracting the attention of the rest of the unit. "Stop that, you dweeb! No more creepy meditation! You are not a Monolithian anymore! Or maybe you are?"

Vasyl jabbed him in the chest.

"Maybe you are? A little traitor, eh?"

Mamon grabbed him by the wrist, and broke it with a loud snap. He pushed the howling Vasyl away and closed his eyes again.

I am an ex-Monolithian, he thought. Part human, part tool of the Monolith. And although I have broken free, I will always miss belonging. I just can't help it.

Despite Vasyl's screams, the silence was in his head as delightful as ever.



Firecracker's Memories

FIRECRACKER'S MEMORY 01

The chimera emerged from the woods and roared. Then it lowered its head to sniff the ground.

"It's got the bait," Firecracker said and put a lollipop into her mouth. "Quite a big one."

"It has been roaming around the facility for days," the researcher blurted out with hatred. "We had to abandon our work and hide. A week of hiding! Do you know the consequences of such a delay in your research?"

"No. And frankly, I don't care. I've got my own science to develop, and I am glad for the specimen you delivered."

The chimera trudged to the body of the deer and sniffed it carefully.

"It knows," the researcher yelled.

"I use only odorless substances in my bombs," Firecracker sighed.

"But this one is particularly cunning. We have-"
"Hush. And watch."

The chimera roared again as if to inform the area that the find was its and its alone, and then bent its head to gorge it down. A split second later, it was shredded to pieces by a deafening explosion.

"See?" Firecracker beamed. "This is science, too. Now, payment time, egghead."

Her smile was bitter, though, as if she had just remembered something unpleasant.

Gain Personal Item card **PS081 (Self-made Explosives)**.

FIRECRACKER'S MEMORY 02

Firecracker watched the bandits unpack the boxes. She saw them examine the packs of plastic explosives with pathetic awkwardness, and she had to contain herself not to spring up and charge into the room, her gun blazing.

No, that would be unprofessional and most likely would cost her life. She had to wait.

And she did. Soon enough, the bandits prepared the sorry bomb of theirs, and both of them left, first to take a leak in the bushes and then to smoke outside. Still, no resemblance of professionalism.

Firecracker stood up and waited for blood to start flowing in her sleeping knees. The time for recapture had come.

Both bandits were miserable sappers, but they could be much better shots. Therefore, Julia decided not to use her gun. Instead, she gripped a grenade.

Wonderful, she thought. They are far enough from the building.

The grenade was cold in her hands. She removed the pin and threw it.

Both bandits died in a terrifying flash.

"I am sorry," she explained to the dead bodies. "I just couldn't stand such a lack of professionalism."

And she walked in, grabbed all the explosives, and stuffed them into her backpack.

"I am going to put all those toys where they belong," she added with fake satisfaction.

For anyone who knew her wouldn't miss the sadness in her eyes.

Gain Personal Environment card **PS083 (Bomb Stash)**.

FIRECRACKER'S MEMORY 03

Firecracker knelt just like the other team members. Everybody raised their weapon, aiming at the dark gap of the entrance where the last bandits vanished.

"This is where they are going to make their last stand," said someone.

"Shut up, stupid," the leader spat. "They are lousy, stinky bandits, and such make no last stands."

Firecracker raised her binoculars. Night was falling, yet she managed to glimpse some running silhouettes in the dark of the bunker.

"Those will," she said.

"Unbelievable," the leader snarled. "All right. We will fry them out of their hiding hole. The bunker-"

"No," Firecracker snapped. "Wait. There are easier ways. Cover me, you hot-headed bastards, and I will flash them out."

In a hail of bullets, she crawled up to the bunker wall, and, dazed by the rattle, she threw a flash grenade inside through the window. The dark of the inside burned with eye-scorching whiteness.

"Move," she yelled to her companions. "Get inside while they are blinded."

After-images partly blinding her, she saw the silhouettes of her comrades rushing inside, and a couple of resounding shots later, there was silence. Then she heard the sounds of joy.

"No thanks needed," she whispered hoarsely. "Always trust a woman. We never fail."

Once you did, a thought in her mind said bitterly.

Gain Personal Turn token – Deft.

FIRECRACKER'S MEMORY 04

"We're not going to live through it," Sasha said, resigned, and he threw the cigarette butt away.

Firecracker rolled her eyes.

"You've said that hundreds of times," she reminded him.

"Yeah, but this time it's for real."

Firecracker may have guessed it, too. The gunfire resumed with renewed intensity which probably meant the enemy was getting ready to throw them away from their positions. Fortunately, their leaders didn't want anybody to die over a few square meters of bog.

"Fall back," the sergeant yelled. "Fall back, losers. Quick! On the double!"

"Keep on the path!" Firecracker added. "There are APs everywhere, lads! The ones I made myself, so they've got to work!"

Coarse laughter was the only answer. One by one, their unit of eight people was falling back short and sweet until grenades began to rain down on them. Firecracker recognized them immediately, and she figured the enemy could not be further than 300 meters away. The night came alive with explosions.

Sasha was the first one to lose control. His eyes open wide, he dashed forward. She managed to grab his shoulder, but he slipped away and kept running.

"Sasha!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "Stop! They will shoot you like-"

She never finished because an enemy emerged, and she ducked to open fire. She shot an entire clip, and the hostile fell, but more appeared at the same moment. Then she remembered what her backpack contained. Her hands trembling, she got them out.

Smoke grenades arched through the air and exploded upon impact. The hostiles disappeared behind thick billows. Her unit became invisible for a few long, life-saving seconds.

"Fall back!" she yelled.

I will save you, she thought. This time I will not fail.

Gain Personal Attachment card PS082 (Smoke Screen Launcher).

FIRECRACKER'S MEMORY 05

Firecracker blew the dust from an old board and looked at a yellowed periodic table. She tapped her finger at the teacher's desk and took a deep breath.

The ruined building hadn't been a school for decades, but she could tell it still smelled like one. Who could know it better than her, an ex-chemistry teacher herself?

"I could be standing in a classroom like this," she said, her voice echoing in the empty space. "If I hadn't decided to enter the Zone to find a student of mine."

She knew the boy had not parents and lived with an uncle who never cared. She knew that the uncle would often beat the boy. She felt no reason to be responsible for him, but she did.

It was an act of selfless sacrifice some natural-born teachers are stupid enough to do. She still remembered the horror she felt when she found the dead body of the runaway boy. She still remembered the anxiety of coming back, much greater than the fear caused by the monstrosities of the Zone.

Was it fear that never let her leave the Zone? Or despair? Guilt, maybe? Or all of them?

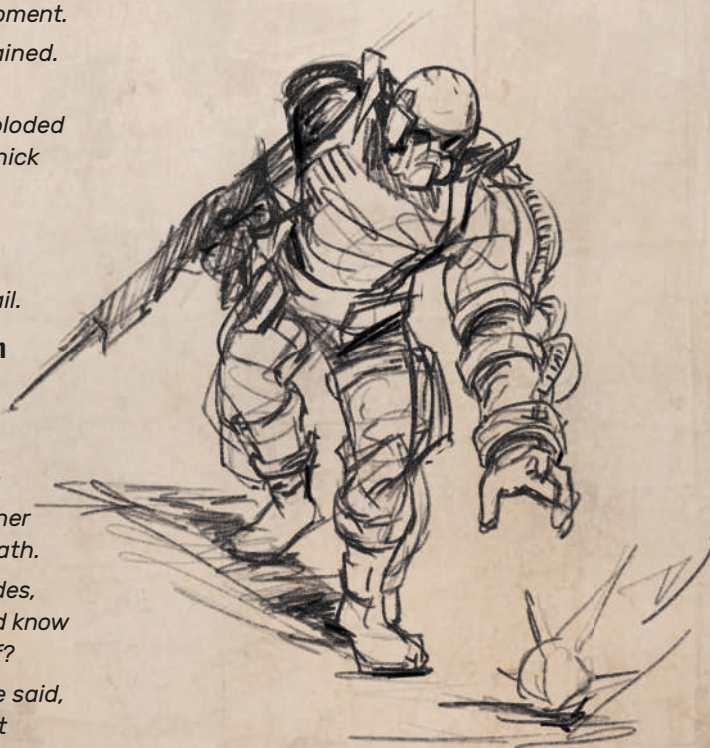
One thing was sure. All those explosions were not enough to smother the regret. All those grenades, bombs, and mines were too little to alleviate her suffering.

For everywhere she looked, she saw the dead face of the teenage boy whom she didn't find.

What will I have to do to make the pain go away? She thought. I didn't force the kid to come here. Why do I take the blame? I did want to find him. It was too late, though. I couldn't do it.

She took one more deep breath and inhaled the fading ambiance of a classroom.

Maybe one day I will somehow make up for it, she consoled herself. I can't stop looking for the right way, it seems.



Ayana's Memories

AYANA'S MEMORY 01

The mutant came nearer and nearer.

The bloodsucker was surprisingly fast, and it had already smelled them. Ayana knew about it and searched even more feverishly. Whoever had controlled the bunker left it in a terrible mess, but she knew that there could be something useful among the rubble.

Like a forgotten clip.

"It's coming," moaned the wounded man she had hauled inside. He had lost a lot of blood, but obviously not enough to faint. Insanity flashed in his eyes, and Ayana knew he was about to panic.

Not good.

The mutant snarled. It could be two or three hundred meters away from the bunker.

"The door," the man groaned. "Block the door or else."

And there it was. A clip for her weapon somewhere in the debris. It looked as if had been left here just for her. It was not even battered, and only slightly rusty.

"The door!"

"Shut up," Ayana snarled and reached the bunker window.

The mutant had definitely scented them, which made it almost lose its mind. It charged toward the bunker, roaring and salivating. It was a ghastly sight to process, and Ayana knew exactly how to put an end to it. She aimed and pulled the trigger.

Five bullets were enough to snuff its life.

Ayana sighed and looked at the wounded survivor, gasping and looking at her in terror.

"It's gone," she announced. "Stop panicking. Now I will see to your injuries."

"Why?" the survivor managed. "Why are you doing all this?"

Ayana shrugged.

"Because the Zone is watching," she said and found fresh bandages. "Now, let me do my job."

Gain Personal Turn token – Resourceful.

AYANA'S MEMORY 02

Sweat ran down Ayana's face as she dashed for the safety of the forest. Hoarse cries resounded behind her, and someone fired their gun. The bullet swept dangerously close, and she couldn't help but duck her head. She had never shown fear to others, which didn't mean she was immune to it.

No, she was scared.

Another bullet tore through the air, and more shouts rang out. She was being chased.

Then she saw a mutant nest at the edge of the forest. No, not saw. She sensed it. And another one close to it. Joy flashed in her narrowed eyes.

She blew her whistle to attract the pursuers' attention, and then she plunged between the nests.

Nobody sane would run such a risk. Nobody would attempt to run so close to mutant holes for fear of luring them out. Nobody but her.

Her pursuers heard her whistle and halted at the sight of the nests, surprised, perhaps even shocked.

No mutants had emerged – there was even a chance that they had already abandoned the holes – but the bandits didn't know, did they?

Her smile became sinister, as she'd just got the upper hand. She skidded to a halt, turned on her heel, and opened fire into unsuspecting bandits. Two of them fell on the spot, and before the others appeared, she was already gone.

Gain Personal Item card PS091 (Whistle).

AYANA'S MEMORY 03

Ayana's brain worked feverishly fast. She knelt and looked at her weapon.

How many times have I fired?

She searched her belt but found no more clips.

She swore under her breath and cautiously looked from behind the chunk of concrete which served as her cover.

In the holographic sight on her gun, she saw that the zombies were approaching. Spread thinly, they emerged from the wood and headed for the ruins where she was hiding. They were moving slowly, yet relentlessly.

Three of them, and she was almost out of ammo.

But... Maybe not all hope was lost? Maybe there was a way out?

She grasped one of her talismans and shut her eyes.

You don't see me, she said in her thoughts. You. Don't. See. Me.

She kept repeating those words, and her heartbeat calmed down even though she heard the approaching crunch of their feet and the clink of their guns.

She dared open her eyes, exhaled, and broke into a run.

Ayana flashed on like a ghost, every leap perfectly soundless. She perfectly blended with every obstacle, and no zombie even so much as glanced in her direction.

They didn't see her.

Was it another coincidence? Her luck? Ayana had no idea. Swiftly and quietly, she disappeared with no trace.

Gain Personal Attachment card PS092 (Holographic Sight).

AYANA'S MEMORY 04

The chimera was lying low like it was planning ahead. None of them were capable of that, obviously, but Ayana had been dealing with the creatures of the Zone for so long that she was naturally willing to assign them human attributes.

So yes, it was lying low, ready to burst like a furious geyser.

Ayana knew it. She had been watching the creature for hours, and she had also determined how fast it may run and how far it can jump. She'd learned its patterns, and she'd watched the beast as if it were an old dog coming every day for a bone she would leave for it.

And the artifact she called Snooze was a great help. Given enough time, it would make everyone sleepy within a radius of forty steps. If it weren't for the adrenaline, she would have succumbed to it as well.

Soon enough, she was sure the beast was sleeping. She sprang up, ran to it, and sneaked into its grimy, smelly lair. Out in the corner of her eye, she noticed the eyelids of the beast flutter. She grabbed her gun, put it to the skull of the beast, and pulled the trigger. Hardly had the echo died down when she retrieved the artifact hidden in its lair and left it. One hour later, she met her contact.

"Here," she said, handing him the artifact. "It is surely a healing one. Keep it safe."

Her contact, a young Freedom soldier, opened his mouth.

"Just like that? And you want nothing in return?"

"No." Ayana was already turning. "It was fun. And it made me... I don't know. Belong? Never mind. Make good use of it."

"Hey!" the soldier yelled. "You can at least use our ammo depot!"

"Maybe." Ayana half-smiled. "Thanks. But first, I will get you another artifact. You know, the Zone is watching."

Gain Personal Environment card **PS093 (Ammo Depot)**.

AYANA'S MEMORY 05

Humming a soothing song she had learned from her grandma, Ayana once again leaned over the wounded stalker to check the bandages. Suddenly, she opened her twitching eyelids. Ayana stopped singing and gave the woman time to overcome the pain and focus her eyes.

"Where?" she managed. "Where am I? And who are you?"

Ayana smiled.

"They call me Ayana," she replied. "And you are safe. This is all that should matter."

The stalker kept looking around. She noticed the small fire and a thin pillar of smoke escaping through a hole in the ceiling. She saw a pot over the fire, a heap of medicine, and some bandages. And a bloodied towel.

"Are you a witch or what?" she blurted out.

Ayana smiled wryly.

"And if I am?" she asked.

The stalker closed her eyes to fight another wave of pain.

"You are not a witch," she managed. "I remember now. You are the one they call Ayana. You bring people out of trouble. You heal."

"I don't heal." Ayana shook her head. "No such skills. But the rest is true."

"Why?" The wounded one's eyes were big now.

"Once the same thing happened to me. Someone found me unconscious. Dressed my wounds, warmed me up, put me in a safe place, left some food, and went away."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It would be stupid if I didn't return the favor. The Zone is watching. So I do. Hold still, I need to dress your wound again."



Chort's Memories

CHORT'S MEMORY 01

Chort ducked and hid in the hole, his whole body trembling with exhaustion.

The pursuit had been going on for too long. He had known the soldiers of the Monolith to be fervent pursuers, but the intensity of their fire and the fierceness of their pressure was significant.

I may have stepped into the middle of their operation, he thought. Just my luck.

He needed to get out of there. The Monolith was not a joke, and the veteran following him must have been someone prominent in that sick sect. An officer, maybe?

Chort grabbed his weapon, replaced the clip, and took a deep breath.

Someone was coming.

The steady footsteps of a confident soldier, certain of an easy kill.

I'll give you an easy kill, you bastard, Chort thought vehemently. He grabbed his pendant to focus and jumped up to rain fire on the oncoming opponent.

There was no fire, though. His weapon jammed.

The Monolithian veteran, tall and fearless, fired back and didn't even slow down. He was coming for Chort like a soulless golem.

Chort tossed the useless gun away and grabbed his knife, his most trusted weapon, the first he had wounded a hornhead with. As always, he felt strength and confidence radiating through his body.

And his mind was already set.

The second the gunfire ceased, Chort jumped out of his hiding place, armed only with the knife.

No soldier can survive a slash across his throat, not even a Monolithian.

"I am a pursuer too, you know?" he explained to the dying soldier. "But I don't make stupid mistakes, because my mission is more important than yours. I must avenge an innocent life."

And off he went to pick up another trace.

Gain Personal Item card PS101 (Scrimshaw Pendant).

CHORT'S MEMORY 02

Chort raised his weapon and aimed carefully.

The bandit had probably thought that he had chosen a good hiding spot, but Chort knew every bush in the area. Besides, he noticed a glint. Sunglasses? A well-polished barrel? A scope, maybe?

We will see, Chort thought vehemently and pulled the trigger. The shot rang out.

To his surprise, the intruder didn't stand the pressure. He sprang up and ran away, not even trying to shoot back. Chort smiled wickedly.

A distant yell told him that his expectation was fair. The man had fallen into an overgrown trench he knew very well. It was his old foxhole, after all.

Slowly, he neared the hole and looked inside to see that the intruder had sprained his ankle. Hissing with pain, he grabbed his gun and aimed, but Chort was already in a firing position. His first bullet shattered the intruder's good leg, the second – the arm, and the third one pierced the chest.

"This isn't your place," he growled. "This is nobody's place. Only hers."

Once again, he pictured Marika's face, the girl he had promised to take to safety but failed. This was where she had died, trampled by a hornhead, her brain burned dead.

This was where he had failed.

He forgot about the dead intruder and faced the indifferent swamp.

"I know you wanted to live," he said sadly. "This was your only wish. I am going to find the white hornhead who took that wish away and kill it, but it will not bring you back. I am sorry."

It may have been just an illusion, but Chort had a feeling he heard a whisper.

"Forget the monster. Help others like me."

Was it the swamp? A memory? A psi-anomaly or maybe just his imagination? Chort had no idea, but suddenly, he felt like he wanted to believe it was Marika's voice.

"Yes," he said. "I will help others like you. AFTER I kill the monster. If it is actually still somewhere here."

Gain Personal Environment card PS103 (Foxhole).

CHORT'S MEMORY 03

The hornhead sniffed the ground and looked around anxiously as if it suspected something.

Chort froze, and quietly lifted his submachine gun.

He had already learned that those creatures had an acute sense of smell, and the wind was not in his favor. Besides, some of them appeared smarter than others which worried him even more.

Could it be that the monster had detected the trap? Had it somehow figured out that each step may lead to a painful mistake?

Chort calmed his breath as he stared at the beast. Suddenly, the concrete wall he was hiding behind didn't seem to be a lasting barrier.

There was one more trick up his sleeve, though.

He could provoke the beast. It was risky – a strong

telepath could entangle his brain, but Chort also knew they needed some time to do that. Perhaps he will pull it off.

"Hey, you bastard," he yelled. "I'm gonna pluck your bloody eye out, you know?"

The monster bellowed and shook its antlers and then just charged toward the voice.

No telepathy. Just an old-school charge.

The anti-personnel mine that Chort had planted went off a second later and ripped its body to pieces. The man stood up and shook his head to regain full sense of hearing.

"Not the one," he stated. "But it still counts."

And made another mark on the hilt of his knife.

Gain Personal Turn token – Frantic.

CHORT'S MEMORY 04

The tracks were deep and visible even for a layman. Chort knelt to finger them, and then he even bowed to smell them. The patrol captain looked at him in disbelief.

"Two days old," Chort said when he stood up. "Three, maybe."

"So, the beast is nesting here," the patrol captain guessed.

"Nesting?" Chort smiled wryly. "Hornheads don't nest. They only take control of a stretch of a forest or bog, but otherwise, it is true. The bastard lives here in the area. Which means we split."

He touched his menacingly long knife, rearranged his new armor additions, and closed his eyes for a second as if he was getting ready for some spiritual challenge.

"What do you mean?" the patrol captain protested.

"Listen, I am not keen on fighting psionic monsters this size, but together, we stand a better chance. Besides, you don't even have a gun."

"I have a knife. And this is all I need. Go home, captain. Thank you for showing me the way," Chort said and turned to follow the tracks.

"Hey," the captain called. There was a weird look in his eyes, something like sympathy and admiration mixed with disbelief. "You sure you don't need us?"

"No," he shouted over his shoulder. "This thing with the hornhead... Believe it or not, but it's personal. Seriously."

There was no reply. Chort hurried up.

Somehow, he knew that the hornhead was waiting for him. A mad smile danced on his lips.

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS102 (Shoulder Pads)**.

CHORT'S MEMORY 05

The clearing he knew so well appeared smaller than the last time, overgrown with thorny bushes. Nobody would even think of taking a break here so, much to Chort's relief, nobody had probably even noticed a shallow, inconspicuous mound under a tilted birch tree.

Good, he thought. In a year or so, the grass will be tall enough to mask it all. The Zone will protect my secret much better than I would.

With a sigh, he sat down next to the mound and looked at it fondly.

"It's been a while," he said finally. "I'm sorry. There were... There were things to do."

He opened his backpack and took out a book.

"Ready for some Melville?" he asked. "Sure you are. Now, where were we?"

He thumbed the book for a while, and then he smiled again.

"Funny thing, you know. I think I have become someone just like Captain Ahab. And I will get my Moby Dick soon enough. And after that, I will do your bidding. I will help those in need."

He waited for a while, yearning to hear the same whisper as before, but no. The Zone was quiet. All he could hear were mosquitoes buzzing in the sticky, hot air.

He listened some more, and then he started reading.



Velet's Memories

VELET'S MEMORY 01

The barrage of enemy fire was too strong, and Velet instinctively knew that they needed to withdraw. Most of the enemy shooters were well hidden, but there was no denying that their small unit was up against a big force, perhaps two bandit units combined.

"Fall back! Fall back!" the commander screamed at the top of her lungs. "Fall back or—"

She didn't finish. An enemy bullet pierced her hip, and fell to the mud.

Velet was with her in no time, nimble as a tiger. He picked the screaming leader up, tossed her onto his shoulder, and turned to their opposition. Firing a few rounds at a time, he retreated step by step, paying no heed to his commander's screams.

He knew that his surviving comrades had hidden behind an embankment. Out in the corner of his eye, he saw one of them jump out to empty a clip toward the bandits. He fell in a second like a stringless puppet. Velet picked him up, too.

"Stay down there, you losers," he yelled. "I can't lift the third one of you!"

He managed to carry them into a hole where the enemy fire was no longer a threat. He placed the wounded on the ground, and searched his dangler for bandages and antiseptics. He quickly dressed their wounds and he was just about to get up and come back to the battlefield when his commander grabbed his wrist.

"I won't forget that," she whispered and looked into his eyes for a split second longer than he had expected.

Gain Personal Item card PS111 (Dangler).

VELET'S MEMORY 02

The problem appeared a few clicks before the Wandering Trader Camp. And its name was a pseudogiant.

After an hour of escape, Velet was out of breath. Even his enormous, seemingly endless strength had its limits, and he had already crossed them hours ago. Nevertheless, the pseudogiant didn't give up and chased him with fanatical relentlessness.

Velet knelt and touched the ground. He still felt the vibrations.

The pursuit was on, and the monster was about to appear any second.

The man rearranged his ballistic collar and calculated the rounds he had left. Not many. Fifteen or even less. Too few.

But there is an end to everything.

Velet roared out his challenge and positioned himself in the way of the charging beast. He opened fire at close range. With every round piercing his body, the pseudogiant slowed a fraction, but its eyes still shone with fury and hatred.

Then the gun jammed.

Velet cursed under his breath, tossed it away and grabbed both remaining grenades. Yelling his fury out, he tossed them at the beast.

He shielded his eyes with his forearm, but the explosions deafened him. In shocked silence, he watched in slow motion the bloodied pseudogiant stagger and finally fall, life escaping from its tiny eyes. Then, his body still trembling with extreme emotions, Velet drew his knife and sank it into the beast's eye socket.

Only then did he breathe with relief.

His PDA pinged. Velet wiped his hands and took the device.

"Are you OK?" it said on the screen.

"Of course," he typed back, his finger still trembling. "And I am coming back to you."

Gain Personal Environment card PS113 (Wandering Trader Camp).

VELET'S MEMORY 03

The silhouettes of bandits milled in the cracked eye of the binoculars.

"Dammit, not them again," sighed Jaeger. "I am too exhausted to run."

"So is everybody," said Maria. "Stop complaining." Her voice lacked conviction, though.

"Hey, big man." She patted Velet's shoulders. "We must move on! Nightfall is upon us."

Then she realized that Velet was looking in a different direction.

"I have bad news," he said in a grim voice.

"Well, bandits are bad news already," she said, trying hard to sound tough. "Is there anything worse than that?"

"Yes. I see the artifact we're after," Velvet said. "But the anomaly close to it is immense!"

Maria looked there, too.

"Too immense. That artifact is out of our reach," she stated grimly.

"No, not that." Jaeger sagged. "We're not gonna get out of here alive, are we?"

Velet's eyes glinted.

"I'll go and get it," he announced. "You cover me."

Maria widened her eyes.

"How? How will you snatch the artifact? You're gonna fry yourself or worse."

"Cover me," he repeated.

Busy repelling the onslaught, Jaeger and Maria didn't see Velet get the artifact, but soon he was back. The broad smile on his face told them that he had been successful.

"How did you do that?" Jaeger asked in surprise, his voice barely piercing the din of the battle.

"I made a promise to someone important," Velet replied and opened fire, too.

Gain Personal Turn token – Sorter.

VELET'S MEMORY 04

It was as quiet as a battlefield can get after the last bullet had been fired. Evening mists were floating above the bodies of dead stalkers. The Monolithians were approaching steadily.

Velet clenched his teeth. The pain was almost unbearable – one of the enemy bullets had pierced his thigh – but he forced himself to lie still. He knew that they were good shots, and had managed to take out all the men in his squad. Velet could consider himself lucky for getting away with only one wound.

Actually, luck wasn't the real reason. It was his common sense. If he hadn't invested so much in his armor attachment, he would be dead like the others.

Escape was out of the question, though, and so was retaliation. There was only one way left to survive.

Through half-closed eyelids, Velet followed the approaching Monolithian, who stopped at him, bent to search his body, and snatched away his ballistic collar. Velet tensed his muscles instinctively, and the Monolith warrior stiffened, surprised.

He didn't manage to alert anyone, though.

Velet sprang up silent as a ghost, a blade in his grip. In a fraction of a second, he ripped the Monolithian's throat open and pulled him down. No one heard anything.

A few long minutes later, Velet got up, took his collar, and limped away from the battlefield.

That bitch of the Zone has mercy on me today, he thought. And that's good. I have someone to live for.

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS112 (Ballistic Collar)**.

VELET'S MEMORY 05

Ganna waited before the cottage, just like always.

Well, the name "cottage" was a bit of an exaggeration. The mismatched door, the leaking windows, the corrugated roof, and all that... Anywhere else outside the Zone, it would just be a decrepit rat hole, but for Velet it was the center of his world.

The place where his heart beat. Where warmth and serenity lived.

Ganna smiled broadly and rearranged the blanket on her legs. Velet didn't miss the fact that there was a sniper rifle close to her.

"I am so happy to be back," he said and bent to kiss her.

Her eyes shone. Her hand slid down his massive forearm and squeezed his hand.

"You're OK," she said. Her words were more of a statement than a question, but Velet could hear the relief.

"Of course, I am," he laughed merrily. "There is no power in the Zone that could chew me up."

"Don't jinx it," she warned him, but smiled too.

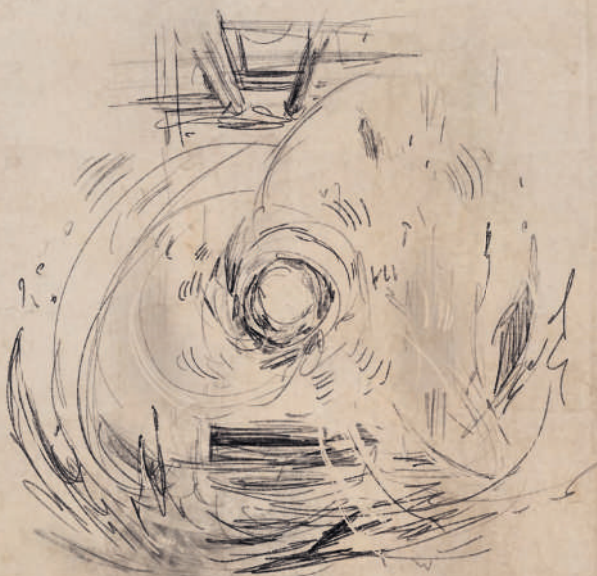
"Did you get it?"

Velet showed her the backpack.

"I did. Quite nice artifacts! And I have already contacted a buyer. Soon we will have enough money. We will leave this hellhole and go somewhere to have your leg fixed."

"Still don't know whether to believe your promises," Ganna said, her voice trembling.

"Do that, and life will be easier," Velet said and rolled her wheelchair inside.



Taras's Memories

TARAS'S MEMORY 01

The rain was relentless. It whipped the ground with fury and the puddles around their hideout foamed. Despair was thick in the air.

"There is no end to this mayhem," Ivanna said. She was standing in the doorway and staring at the endless blanket of clouds.

"We're gonna be late for the regroup." Lev lit his cigarette, the fifth one in a row. "Lieutenant will tear us apart."

"No one will tear you apart," Taras cut in. "Lieutenant is no fool. He knows that marching in the rain makes no sense. Give me that lighter."

"We will be late!" Ivanna tossed her PDA away. "We're gonna miss the biggest operation in history. They will go artifact hunting and we will be sitting here and rotting away!"

"Or not," Taras said, rummaging in his backpack. "Who knows what may happen. We still might get there on time."

"If we fly," Vlodko spat.

Taras gave him a wry look.

"We can't fly," he said. "We will walk. This is why you'd better fix that shoe you've been complaining about. All of you, clean your weapons. Tend to your blisters. Change the dressings if you have to. Get some sleep. Let's use the time we have. Moaning time is over."

"And you, serge?" asked Ivanna, watching Taras start the fire.

"And I," he smiled broadly. "I will cook some delicious dinner for you, kids."

Gain Personal Turn token – Inspiring.

TARAS'S MEMORY 02

"Look." Taras put another photo onto the rickety table. "And this is little Tanya. My nephew's daughter. She was eight when the picture was taken so now... I don't know. She could be graduating."

Vlodko looked at him flatly.

"Why are you even showing me this?" he asked, trying to contain his disdain.

"Well, this is my family." Taras looked at his young companion in disbelief. "They are precious to me, kid."

"Yeah, but how long you have been here, serge? Ten years? More?" Vlodko scoffed. "They could be dead now! What does it all matter?"

Taras pulled his mustache angrily.

"It does matter because family is all you get. Because—" He never finished because the world outside exploded, and the ground shook. A random thought told Taras that their dugout could have just been hit by an RPG missile, and his body was already on the move. Before the ceiling began to collapse, he grabbed the shocked youth by the arms and practically hauled him outside into the cold, black night. Their roof was already in flames or tumbling down.

He dragged the half-conscious young man further and further away from the burning inferno. He left him on the ground behind a semi-circle of sandbags and knelt behind the stump of a charred tree, raising his rifle. It wasn't difficult to spot the shooter who was busy loading the launcher.

Shooting him down was even easier.

Taras sighed and looked at Vlodko who was coming to.

"And you are family to me, kid," he panted. "Even though we met only two days ago."

Gain Personal Item card **PS121 (Sandbags)**.

TARAS'S MEMORY 03

"Inside!" Taras yelled, his voice louder than the bang of bullets. "Get inside! Now! On the double, kids! They will see you any second now!"

One by one, the members of his team disappeared into the dark of the bunker. The last of them hesitated at the doorstep and looked at the sergeant. It was Ivanna, his second-in-command.

"You're not coming?" he asked incredulously.

"No," Taras snarled and pushed the soldier inside.

"Find the lever to open the hatch and wait for me to come back. I will lead the pursuit away."

"But—"

Taras shut the hatch, hid in the nearby bushes, and turned toward the approaching assailants. He froze, checked his compensator, aimed, and welcomed them with a volley of fire. He saw two bodies fall to the ground and turned to flee.

Now, that will certainly get their attention, he thought.

He ran and ran, deliberately leading the pursuit away from the bunker where his unit was hiding. He ducked when a bullet flew too close, fired a few rounds to maintain contact, and kept fleeing. His breath wheezy, he led them away, all alone, a grey-haired wolf of war.

His thoughts, however, circled around the souls in the bunker.

You're gonna be fine, kids, he thought. I have taken care of you.

Gain Personal Attachment card **PS122 (Compensator)**.

TARAS'S MEMORY 04

Every stalker has their own stash. A good stalker, that is.

Taras had always considered himself to be a soldier rather than a stalker, therefore he had none. Well, he would collect stuff, mostly meds and dry food, but he wouldn't keep them for too long.

There was always someone to share them with.

And come winter, he always took a leave from his duties and gave the command over to Ivanna. He would suit up and venture toward a small, ruined village of five houses close to the edge of the Zone, carrying a backpack full of supplies. The village he headed for was too far from artifact-rich areas to attract anyone's attention, thus popular with a few people who deserved his respect.

A few disabled veterans. A blind man who'd spent too much time in a radiated area. Two or three samosely. Two elderly stalkers. The lot.

Once he got there, Taras would sneak into a building that ages ago was a post office and knock on the door. Usually, someone answered very quickly, and the words were always the same.

"Who the hell is that?"

"Merry Christmas, you old, lame bastards," Taras would yell and plunge in, welcomed by bursts of laughter and happy cheers.

Gain Personal Environment card PS123 (Storage).

TARAS'S MEMORY 05

"Sing for us," one of the stalkers suggested. His neighbor was already about to pass him the guitar but Taras shook his head.

"No," he said. "I am not good at it. My throat is sore and I don't feel like singing."

He looked at the flames for a while. No one spoke, but one of his companions silently passed him a cup of tea. It was bitter, but its warmth quickly spread all over his body.

"Thank you," he said. "You are a decent group, I must say."

"Join us, then," one of the stalkers suggested. "We could use the experience of a gray wolf like you."

"I can't." Taras shook his head. "I got my own team. Good kids. There is Ivanna who is the smartest and the most cautious. There is Lev, a bit of a hothead, but a decent fellow. There is Vlodko who acts indestructible because he is too young to realize he's not. And there are others, too. I am responsible for them."

He smiled bitterly, his eyes misty now.

"And I owe it to them. Three years ago, they found me half-dead and critically wounded. No one forced them to do it, but they took me in and nursed me back to life. They did it out of the goodness of their hearts. Would you imagine?"

He laughed out.

"And it was a smart decision, because later on they let me take charge of the unit, and I saved them from certain death more times than I can remember. It is funny to admit in our harsh world, but I miss them. And I fear for them. I am returning to them tomorrow, and I can't wait."



Hulyash's Memories

HULYASH'S MEMORY 01

The bottle arched in the air and smashed against the wall.

The response was immediate. The bloodsucker roared and emerged from its lair.

Hulyash's eyes widened when he saw the sheer size of the beast. It was a scar-covered adult with fully grown tentacles around its snout. It immediately turned invisible, but Hulyash knew that it was enough to aim at and around the gaping doors before the bastard began to zigzag.

Or flee, maybe. Oh, that would be a waste. Where would he find another one in an equally convenient place?

No, luckily the bloodsucker was bent on killing, and Hulyash's weapon began to spit fire. The blurred shape charging with unbelievable speed slowed down, torn apart by bullets. Its iron will to kill its opponent made it push on until life eventually snuffed out of it. The bloodsucker fell to the ground only a few steps before Hulyash's smoking gun. The tentacles around its mouth trembled and twitched.

The man sighed, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and thanked himself for loading the gun with specially prepared ammo. Then he smiled grimly and pulled his axe.

"Don't take it personally, mate," he managed. "I am only here for those. It's sixty coupons each. Blame trophy lovers."

And he started hacking the tentacles away.

Gain Personal Attachment card PS912 (Infused Rounds).

HULYASH'S MEMORY 02

The bars of the cage rattled and clicked metallically when the snork attacked from the inside with brutal force. It repeated a few times and stopped. Hulyash smiled wickedly.

"Running out of strength, aren't you?" he whispered and came close to the cage, his feet splashing in the dirty waters of the swamp. The rattling resumed when the snork sensed his arrival.

"Oh, I am so sorry this is happening to you," Hulyash said. "Blame those bastards who need your head on their walls to feel more macho. Now I will—"

He froze as the snork opened its mouth and uttered a shrill, unpleasant sound. Then another one. And again. Hulyash knew enough about snorks and the sounds they made to recognize this one. The brute was calling its pack.

Barely did he have time to turn around when two of its packmates burst out of the dark. Hulyash's reaction was, fortunately, quick enough. He tossed a dried bloodsucker's head toward them, its tentacles flaccid, yet still terrifying. Both snorks instinctively jumped off, and Hulyash managed to lift his shotgun and pull the trigger to blow the closer one's head effectively, and still, he had ample time to twist and drop his axe onto the other one's skull. The snork's blood splattered him up to his chin, but nevertheless, he smiled.

Then he turned toward his catch. The caged snork bared its fangs.

"You little telltale," he hissed. "Shouldn't have called your mates, you know? Bad, bad snork. But a smart one. The eggheads ready to do experiments on you will be glad!"

The snork yelped as if it understood the human tongue.

"Oh, they will enjoy cutting you up," Hulyash said. "As much as I am gonna enjoy my three hundred coupons!"

Gain Personal Item card PS911 (Terrifying Remnants).

HULYASH'S MEMORY 03

There was a dog among the rubble. Big and sinewy, its huge, misshapen head barely resembling that of a bulldog. It bared its maw and presented rows of glinting teeth as if it wanted the hiding people to see them.

Novy lifted his gun, but Hulyash grabbed his shoulder and pulled him down. They both hid under the window frame.

"Don't you dare shoot, greenhorn," he snarled.

"Why not?" Novy asked, his voice trembling. "Will it drag the entire pack?"

"There is no pack." Hulyash was scanning the nearby bushes. "There is only one of them, hiding somewhere, and sending around its mirror reflections. See how light goes through that one?"

"So, it is an illusion?"

"Damn right. Don't even look at it."

Hulyash weighed his axe.

"Stay here and don't shoot," he added. "I have killed these. Watch and learn."

"And what if you make a mistake?" Novy's voice trembled.

"Your problems will all vanish," Hulyash said and crawled out of the window.

They didn't. The illusion disappeared quickly when Hulyash found the real psydog and killed it with one axe blow.

Gain Personal Environment card PS913 (Follower).

HULYASH'S MEMORY 04

The arrival was a young man dedicated to his science so much that he failed to notice the traps and pitfalls of everyday life. In the Zone, such men were a liability, and Hulyash found them unbearable.

Unless they paid well.

"The aim of my dissertation is to measure the extent of radioactivity on corvidae," he explained fervently.

"I wish to know how it affects their inborn intelligence and..."

"And what do you expect from me?" Hulyash cut in.

"I need you to find me a well-exposed vantage point to commence the first part of the observation cycle," said the biologist.

"Well-exposed?" Hulyash frowned. "If I were you, I would go for a sheltered place. Those crows—"

"I am the researcher," the scientist said firmly. "And I know corvidae. Mutated or not, they are amicable and curious. Find me the spot. I will pay when the research is done."

It was the first interesting thing he'd said.

Hulyash found him the spot, then, and lurked in the murk, watching the biologist awkwardly climbing up the tree. He wasn't excessively surprised when he saw the dark shape of a mutant picking up the scent of the researcher and sneaking up to the tree. Like a shadow, he leaped out of the dark and cleaved the mutant's head with one well-aimed blow.

"Forgive me," he explained to the dead body. "But you got between me and my five hundred coupons."

Gain Personal Turn token – Hunter.

HULYASH'S MEMORY 05

Hulyash pulled the tarp from the cage. The rodents moved back into a corner, frightened by the light of the torch, but it took them seconds to realize they were not in danger. With unprecedented fury, they attacked the bars with their disturbingly long teeth.

The buyer bent over the cage and examined the mutants.

"Nice," he said. "Twelve, I see. I asked for eight."

"Soon, there will be eight. Or fewer. These wretches don't take captivity well, and when cornered, they tend to turn on themselves. There were fifteen of them to begin with."

"So thoughtful," the buyer mused. "And I thought you were going to renegotiate the price."

Hulyash curled his lips in contempt.

"No, I wasn't."

A wad of banknotes changed ownership.

Hulyash was about to leave when he turned to ask:

"Just out of curiosity. Who buys those things?"

"Oh, man!" The buyer burst out laughing. "Those wretches give a whole new meaning to pit fights! Expect more orders soon! And uhm..." the buyer faltered.

"Speaking of curiosity. Why are you doing this?"

"I have my needs," Hulyash replied and left.

The question made him think, though. Think and calculate. The prices of real estate in his destination country kept rising and so did the standards of living. Apart from that, he had to put aside some money for psychological treatment. His dream seemed only further away, but he never lost hope.

"I am about forty thousand coupons away," he thought and went to find another assignment.



Credits

*Dedicated to the memory of Łukasz Orwat,
the best of us. May we meet again.*

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